

A Meeting with Jack and Sybil Geller

By Allison Kirk-Montgomery



On December 9, 2010, on behalf of the Law Society of Upper Canada, I met with Jack Geller and Sybil Geller at their home in Toronto. The interview was recorded as part of the Diversifying the Bar: Lawyers Make History project, developed to preserve and celebrate the experiences of early and exceptional lawyers from Ontario's diverse

communities. Jack Geller was selected and agreed to participate because, in 1959, he was the first Jewish lawyer to become a partner in an establishment firm in Toronto.

Over the course of about two hours, Jack and Sybil generously shared their reflections on and memories of Jack's career and their lives together. They also showed me some scrapbooks full of photographs, various documents and press clippings related to his career, and consented to have these copied for the Archives of the Law Society. Jack and Sybil would point out relevant papers to me as we were discussing events. The images in this document came from the Geller scrapbooks.

This document is based on an audio recording of that meeting, but it is not a true transcript. Instead, the three of us have chosen to present our session as a sort of narrative conversation. This is because Jack has aphasia as a result of a severe stroke he suffered in 2002, and his ability to communicate has been affected. One symptom of aphasia is saying the opposite of what is intended. However, Sybil was able to interpret Jack's words when this occurred.

As she expressed it, "I can fill in for Jack, because I've been there for so much of his life... and he for me."

The Gellers answered questions often as a team, and Jack did participate enthusiastically during the interview, with gestures and facial expressions as well as with words. Though nothing significant has been deleted, some of the material has been reordered to improve flow. The content has been edited by me and by Sybil, to remove repetition, make corrections and to add clarity.

We began our conversation with his family background. Jack, or John, as he was named by his parents, was born in Toronto in 1930. His parents were Jews of Polish ancestry. His father, Kalman, was born in 1898 in Kielce, Poland, and emigrated to Toronto in 1912 with a nephew the same age and a brother-in-law. Jack's mother, Katy, was also from Kielce but the families had not known each other in Poland. Jack's mother arrived in 1914. His parents first met in Toronto at Union Station at the end of her long journey, from Poland by boat to Halifax and then train to Toronto. Her older brother, two years older, was waiting for her with his best friend, Kalman. They were married in 1917.

Jack's parents had arrived, as Sybil said, "with no English, no education," nothing but "guts and intelligence." A few years after they were married, Jack's mother opened a dress store on Queen Street and the money earned was soon invested to build a factory that made ladies' suits and coats on Spadina Avenue. Jack's father stayed in the manufacturing business until 1956, when Jack joined Campbell Godfrey as a young lawyer.

"They said they don't have to worry about you anymore," Sybil reminded Jack.

The senior Gellers built a house in Forest Hill, bought a cottage on Lake Simcoe, and raised their children to be Canadians.

Between them the parents spoke Yiddish at home, but neither Jack nor his sisters really spoke Yiddish well. The parents wanted the children to live in the new world. Jack's older sister, Ruth, born in 1919, studied ballet with Balanchine in New York. She returned to Canada and was a prima ballerina for the only ballet studio in

Canada, the Volkoff Studio. After she married and became Ruth Crocker, she found that the dancing interfered with family life so she stopped dancing. Jack's younger sister, Rose, was born in 1922, and excelled at the piano. Jack was the baby.

Jack as a child decided he would become a lawyer though there were no models in his family to follow. Louis Singer, one of the early Jewish lawyers, was Jack's father's lawyer, but as he was much older than Jack and died in 1959, Jack did not know him.

"Why [I wanted to be a lawyer], I don't know, but I loved it," he said.

Sybil gives some credit to his excellent public school education. "He went through the Forest Hill system, which at that time was comparable to Upper Canada College. It had very very high standards, a very good education system. It was before they were incorporated into the City of Toronto. They had their own Board of Education and a brilliant educator-director, Donald Graham, and he took him under his wing. He was certainly [not very involved] in the physical activities or the scientific activities but, you know, anything that had to do with language and history—"

"I loved it. Reading. Loved it," said Jack.

Jack's parents also encouraged his study. Sybil believes he was influenced by stories of his maternal grandfather who was a scholar, a professional student of the Torah, in Poland. "He died very young, leaving his wife bearing his sixth child unborn. [Jack's] mother was eleven when this happened. This is the way the family tradition was, that books and learning, study, the occupation of study was important."

HART HOUSE DEBATE

Wednesday 16th February, 1949.

8 p.m.

In the Debates Room

QUESTION FOR DEBATE:

"Resolved that in the opinion of this House, Canada, in the conduct of its external relations, has become a satellite state."

Speaker of the House: MR. A. F. LAWRENCE

Moved by MR. S. L. ENDICOTT, Victoria College.

Opposed by MR. A. G. DOUGLAS, S. P. S.

MR. D. J. QUIGLEY, St. Michael's College, will speak third.

MR. J. A. GELLER, University College, will speak fourth.

THE HON. LESTER B. PEARSON, M.P., Secretary of State for External Affairs, will be present as Honorary Visitor.

TELLERS

For the Ayes:

Mr. G. Atlin,
University College

Mr. M. D. Brody,
University College

For the Noes:

Mr. M. K. Hicks,
Trinity College

Mr. V. L. Richards,
S. P. S.

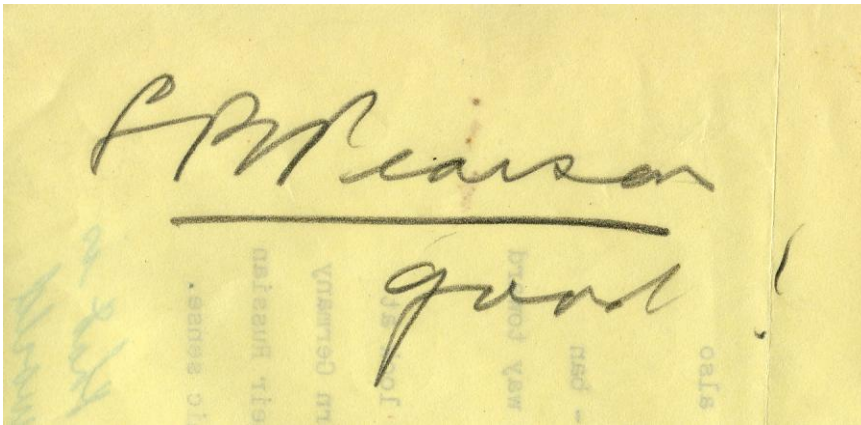
HART HOUSE

NICHOLAS IGNATIEFF,
Warden.

W. M. FRAM,
Clerk of the House.

G. BAGNANI,
Chairman of the Committee.

Jack earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto in 1951. He had a marvellous memory and was a great debater. He won University College's Robinette Debate twice, in 1949 and 1950, the first time that had been achieved, and the Gellers have mugs that commemorate his wins. Jack and Sybil have also kept programmes and other mementoes of his university debating career. Lester Pearson, who debated at Hart House on the topic of external relations, signed a copy of Jack's speech, adding the comment, "Good!"

A photograph of a piece of aged, yellowed paper. On the paper, the name "Lester Pearson" is written in a cursive, handwritten style. Below the name, there is a horizontal line, and underneath that line, the word "good!" is written in a similar cursive script. The paper shows signs of age, including some discoloration and faint, illegible markings in the background.

Despite his academic success, instead of continuing at the University of Toronto, Jack decided to apply to Osgoode Hall.

"In those days," Sybil explained, "Osgoode Hall was where you went if you wanted to be a practising lawyer. If you wanted to go on in the academic world, you went to the University of Toronto." And Jack wanted to practise, because Jack and Sybil were eager to start their life together. The two met in the second week of university, in 1948, on the steps of the Royal Ontario Museum.

Sybil grew up in Toronto at Oakwood and St. Clair. "I'm the elder of two. My father also had a factory and made children's coats. He came from Eastern Galicia,

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which is close to Austria. It's now Poland. My mother was virtually born here," Sybil stated, as she was only a few months old when she came with her mother from Lithuania. Though she only had elementary school education, she was "very bright, very caring."

Sybil enrolled in liberal arts at the University of Toronto. "I wanted to go into social work. Jack was in the four year course, I was in the three year course (in those days you could do that). He moved to the three year out of the four year program so that he could get into law faster, a year faster, and we graduated together." They were married one week after Convocation. "It's going to be our 60th year this July 1."

Jack made a face at me. "She's actually a nice person!"

Sybil laughed. "Yes, he'll stay with me! So that's what happened, we just hit it off."

At law school, Jack graduated with the gold key in 1955. A letter from the Dean of the Osgoode Hall, Smalley-Baker, reads,

My Dear Geller, my warmest congratulations on your obtaining honours. I feel sure that your distinguished success and the preparation for your profession will be but a forerunner of your equally distinguished success in practice. All good wishes,

Yours sincerely, Smalley-Baker.

Despite his successes at law school, getting an articling position was no easy feat. Sybil remembers him knocking on the doors of major law firms and saying, 'I am available.' And he was turned down. "I remember we took the yellow pages and went

through the list and he went to all the multiple-name firms, and was turned down. Even Tory's."



Jack related the response he was met with. "Oh this kid, no. No Jews. Out, out, out, out, out." Neither of them were surprised.

At Arnoldi, Parry and Campbell, in 1953, Jack finally found an articling position in a firm in which he would spend many happy years of his career. At Jack's suggestion, Sybil showed me a letter written by Jack to Jack Godfrey, in which he reminisces about the day he was taken on by the firm.

...back in 1953, when I was looking for a position as an articling student, jobs were at least as hard to find as they are now. You were doing the interviewing. And when Don Wright who was a year ahead of me, brought me in to see you, the first thing which you told me was that you were a little tired because Stephen had been born that morning but that you were in a very good mood.

I have often thought that Stephen's birth was one of the major turning points in my life because it had a lot to do with getting me the job... I have often wondered how you managed to convince Senator Campbell that the risk in hiring me was not inordinate. I will also never forget that at a cocktail party to which you and Mary invited Sybil and me while I was still a [junior], you and Mary introduced me to your friends as one of your partners, at the time something of an overstatement but much appreciated. I didn't even mind having to go out for your milk, when your secretary, Mrs. Smith, was too busy...so that you could calm your ulcer.

Jack laughed, and Sybil explained, "That's so that he could drink Scotch on top of the milk!"

The Gellers consider that the firm that took him on was exceptional and the partners were strong personalities. The word "Jew" never entered the discussion.

"There was a reason," said Sybil. "They already had open minds," especially Jack Godfrey, since his father was the first Unitarian judge in the British Empire. Senator Campbell was very involved in the Presbyterian Church. In the aftermath of the Second World War, there was also an openness and greater interest in tolerance and universality of human rights that influenced Jews. In 1955, when Jack was called to the bar, Nathan Phillips was elected the first Jewish mayor of Toronto.

Sybil said, “C. Minto Pyle, another partner...was absolutely irreligious, it did not matter to him one bit. And Jim Lewtas was an incredible human being who was going to be the president of York University when he died suddenly.”

Jack agreed. Lewtas was “a beautiful guy,” and Pyle was “very smart.” But they were not very communicative, especially Pyle, who apparently forgot to tell Jack that he was hired!

Once he started with the firm, Jack loved the work. It was a chance to “learn, and learn, and learn.” He especially admired Pyle. Pyle’s influence probably explains why Jack decided on corporate-commercial practice and not litigation, despite his background in debating.

Sybil recalled Pyle’s command of the material and his memory.

“Jack came home and his eyes were big. He said, ‘Do you know what he did? We were working on a document and he started dictating, section a, subsection a, article 1 and he dictated right through to the end without a note. Wow!’ ...He admired him so much. One day he came home to me and he said, ‘Do you know what I did today? I began dictating and I dictated it right through without notes.’ I remember that so clearly because he admired it so tremendously...And that was where he wanted to be, with people like that.” After Jack was called to the bar in 1955, he stayed with the firm as a junior.

Jack was again the last to know, in 1959, when he made partner. He knew that the partners were discussing his career among themselves. Sybil said, “Senator Campbell was very concerned about a Jew coming into partnership and handling these

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files on his own.” No Jewish lawyer had ever made partner in an establishment firm in Toronto.

Jack said, “He phoned one partner, another, another.”

Sybil picked up the story: “But Godfrey didn’t care, and Lewtas certainly didn’t care and Pyle and Parry, they didn’t care, but Campbell was concerned” about how the clients would respond “if he was the senior man on file. So he phoned clients, and they all said, ‘If he does the work, we don’t care!’”

Jack, imitating the clients, said, “Excellent! Eh, sure, what’s the difference!”

Sybil continued, “They decided they were going to invite him into partnership.” But Jack and Sybil were still in the dark. “It was towards Christmas and the time of year when the bonuses were offered. We didn’t know where we were, whether to buy a house or not to buy a house.

“Jack finally went in and he said, begging, sort of grovelling a bit, saying, ‘You know, I would like to know [if I am going to be made partner]. One of them said, ‘Oh, didn’t he tell you that we invited you to into partnership?’ Jack said, ‘No, nobody said anything to me.’ Pyle was the one that had...wanted to be the one to tell Jack.” When Pyle was confronted, he insisted that he did tell Jack. ‘He said, ‘Geller, do you not remember when I told you if you wanted to stay with the firm you better change your clothes, that damn waistcoat that you wear...’

Sybil and Jack both laughed, remembering.

Later, the partners told Jack about the phone survey of clients. Sybil said, “They made no bones about this. It was all very open and we had a wonderful relationship, very open. And it was a big laugh, you know? And he became part of the firm lore.”

Meanwhile, the Geller family was growing. Sybil said, “We moved to Don Mills and then in 1960, we moved to Lytton [Avenue in Toronto] and in '64 we moved to Silverwood Avenue, where we were for thirty-four years. We have four children. That's how I know when the houses were bought!” She laughed. “Our eldest [was born in] '55, Lawrence Ian, he is in insurance, he does disability for professionals, that's his niche.”

On their son's work, Jack said, “Gorgeous stuff, you know. Very good.”

Sybil continued, “In '57 our daughter, Dana, was born, and she is a lawyer, non-practising. Dana is married to Jonathan Lampe of Goodmans LLP, doing exactly the same kind of work as Jack was doing. He's a brilliant, brilliant lawyer. Jan, whose married name is Babins, was born in '61, and she's a professional fundraiser, currently looking for a job. And the youngest was born in '64, Harold, he's a lawyer in Ottawa, who does litigation, very specialized litigation.”

On a question about their social life, Sybil said, “At university, Jack went into a fraternity, which was the way you made friends in those days. It was Beta Sigma Rho, which is no longer – it's now merged with Pi Lambda Phi...Jack never had a lot [of friends separate from me].”

Jack commented that at law school, he had “two kinds of friends. Some who are Jewish and the same number not.”

“Because we were married,” Sybil said, “and because he was so involved both through school, and because we were together from when we met in 1948, our friends were sort of family friends, many in the law, but mostly [they were] from a leadership training program that we were invited into, in the Jewish community. Again, post-war, things were changing and it was realized that they needed to have young leadership because of what had happened in the war. The young people had gone off and many were killed. And so in this leadership project which the United Jewish Welfare Fund had started, there were something like, if I remember correctly, ten to fifteen couples. Most of our close friends were from that group because we had like interests. And the firm became our social group.”

Sybil and Jack’s closest friend was named Jim Peters. Sybil said, “Jim was born in Toronto, of a Syrian father and a Lebanese mother. He was a Christian, he was raised Catholic, but later he gave it up, and joined the Unitarian Church for their children (because at school they asked you, ‘what are you?’) Jim was a flaming Arab – black hair, you know, flashing black eyes. In 1949, on the university debating team at University College, he and Jack debated on the partition of Palestine. And they just fought it out, continued afterwards for hours. I was clerk of the house (in order to be with him, I got involved)...We never talked politics again. We lived side by side, we moved to Don Mills because of them. Our cottages were together, our children consider each other cousins. We never talked politics again, all through the wars, in our entire life, after that day. We made that decision as a family, our families together. Jim was very

involved in the Arab Federation in Canada (he's dead now), and Jack in Canadian Jewish Congress. We knew this, we knew our activities. We never, ever talked about it."

Jack and Sybil talked about his early practice, when he learned from all the partners and tried his hand at "everything."

Sybil commented, "The way the firms practised in those days is not the way they do it now. In those days, and certainly in this firm, (obviously we think a lot of the firm, I'm very proud of them), a matter would come up, someone would source it, the Senator [maybe], you know how these things happen, and they would hand off to a junior, and that's how they trained them and that's how they grew. Because it gave them the confidence to do the work. They used to constantly discuss [matters] back and forth. The broadloom and carpet in the hallways had to be replaced every second year, because that's the way they would bounce the stuff off each other."

Today, juniors don't have seem to have real responsibility. "Now it's, you eat what you kill. That's the attitude, unfortunately," Sybil said sadly.

The office was in the Toronto Star Building. The Gellers have a light fixture from their office hanging over their dining room table as a souvenir of those days. Later, the firm became one of the first tenants of the Toronto Dominion Bank tower. They were on the 34th floor.


Not long after being made partner, in 1961, Jack took on one of his biggest roles, counsel to Upper Lakes Shipping during the Norris Commission. The Commission's full name was the "Industrial Inquiry Commission Relating to the Disruption of Shipping on

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*Jack and Sybil Geller interview by Allison Kirk-Montgomery
The Law Society of Upper Canada Diversifying the Bar: Lawyers Make History Project*

December 9, 2010

the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence River System, and Connecting Waters,” also known as the Hal Banks Inquiry, 1962.¹ The firm already had a large maritime law business. Senator Campbell came from the same small town, Roehampton, as did Gordon Leitch, the founder of Upper Lakes Shipping. Campbell Godfrey, the firm, acted for Maple Leaf Milling and the Norris interest and the Leitch shipping firm, Upper Lakes Shipping.



John Arthur Geller
Q.C.

Partner, Campbell, Godfrey & Lewtas, barristers and solicitors,
P.O. Box 36, Toronto-Dominion Centre, Toronto, Ontario
M5K 1C5.

Director: Leitch Transport Ltd.; Ford Glass Limited.

Born Toronto, Ontario, June 22, 1930; son of Kalman and Katy
(Ladowsky) Geller, of Toronto, both deceased.

Educated: Forest Hill Collegiate Institute; University of Toronto,
B.A., 1951; Osgoode Hall Law School, 1955. Appointed
Queen's Counsel 1966.

Joined Campbell, Godfrey & Lewtas, Toronto, 1955.

Member: Canadian Bar Association; County of York Law
Association; International Commission of Jurists.

Married Sybil Gangbar, daughter of Phillip Gangbar, July 1, 1951;
has four children (Lawrence Ian, Harold Leslie, Dana Sue
(Lampe) and Janet Anne).

Club: National.
Jewish.

Residence: 7 Silverwood Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5P 1W3.

¹ *Report of an Industrial Inquiry Commission relating to the Disruption of Shipping on the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence River System, and Connecting Waters* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1963).

...

From two scrapbooks on the Norris Commission put together by Jack's secretary, Sybil showed me a photograph of a huge ship, one built by Upper Lakes Shipping, called the *Northern Venture*. Jack was a director and acted for them, and became their chief counsel after Lewtas died.²

Sybil said, "Peter Gzowski did a cover story in *MacLean's* on Hal Banks.³ There's a movie on him too."⁴ (Hal Banks was a labour leader from the United States who tried to break the shipping unions that existed in Canada and replace them with the Seafarers' International Union, which was reported to have mob connections. Eventually, Banks was charged with assault and he returned to the United States.)

About the Commission hearings, Sybil said, "These were terrible times in our lives, and towards the end of the Royal Commission, our children were threatened. And the RCMP walked them to school and back. This was not a fun time. Jack was threatened, physically threatened. One of the captains on a Great Lakes ship was shot at. Jack Leach had twenty-four hour security with dogs at home...It wasn't a fun time."

"[The Seafarers' Union] sure were tough people, bad," Jack agreed.

² Jack appreciates that Upper Lakes Shipping kept him on the board after his stroke in 2002. Their attitude was, "We'll wait, just wait." He has since resigned.

³ Peter Gzowski, "Hal Banks: Waterfront Warlord," *MacLean's* May 1963.

⁴ Donald Brittain, *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*, directed by Donald Brittain (National Film Board of Canada, 1985).

Sybil said, “I think our parents were more upset more than anyone because in their youth they had had dealings with unions, and as soon as they heard it was the union that was [involved]... they were very upset. But they never knew, we never told them just how bad it was.”

Sybil continued, “You know, our eldest son was influenced. I think that’s why he went into the specialty of disability insurance for professionals. Because we had just bought this house in Forest Hill, a big change. We just had our fourth child. Things were rough and we didn’t know what was going to happen. And I think it influenced him more than he realized because that’s the only way I can explain him going into that particular kind of specialty.”





Jack said, "I wanted to take care, do it, to do it, to do it but then tired. It was difficult, very difficult."

Sybil said, "His health was compromised. He was exhausted... He developed hypertension, which was in the family. He was hospitalized. This was a very trying period, in the early 60s, until it was stabilized, and then he just went on." He was only in his early thirties at the time.

Sybil pointed to a photograph of the commission lawyers in session.

She identified Harry Crowe who became Dean of Atkinson College at York University; Morris Wright, of Soloway Wright in Ottawa. She continued, “Marc Lalonde is there. This is Luc Couture (who acted for the Seafarers’ International Union). Morris Wright was acting for the unions, the collective unions (not the Seafarers’ International Union), and they wanted him on the Commission. Charlie Dubin was commission counsel. These were some of the reporters.” The stress in the room is apparent in the image.

Jack remembered and greatly admired Charles Dubin. Sybil said, “He couldn’t understand why Jack wouldn’t apply for his QC when he had earned it, but Jack didn’t feel he needed it...We were on a plane one time, and Charlie said to him, “Jack, I can’t stand it, I’ll sign it right now. I’ll sign the paper and get your QC.” She laughed, and said, “He did.”

After the Norris Commission came other big cases and long-lasting projects.⁵ Sybil said, “In the talk that Jack did for the Aphasia Institute, he did a “decades of his life” speech: the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, which I think I have. And this is the way it seemed to go. You know, he was at school, then he was in the Commission, and the S.I.U. In the 70s, you were doing Transcanada Pipelines and Arctic Gaz, which is still not completed.”

Meanwhile, Sybil was at home with four children, but very active in community work. “I’ve always been involved. You asked about family. Our families both were

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involved in community. We were raised to give back and be involved. We were raised well. We had values that we assimilated. So I was always involved. At university, I was the first year representative to Hillel, which was the Jewish organization on campus...It still functions, like the Newman Club [for Roman Catholic students, now the Newman Foundation], but this was for Jews.”

After they were married, through the leadership group of young Jewish couples, organized by Faigie Hutner of the Canadian Jewish Congress, their community activities increased. “We met for two years...You had to commit to going to sessions once a month for a year. Each Jewish organization would present at each session.” When you began the programme, you had to commit to go on to a board, and each organizations also agreed to take one of the group on to the board. Both Jack and Sybil became board members of the Jewish Family and Child Services, and Jack also joined the YMCA board.

“That would have been about ’54, ’55, somewhere around there. When he was on the Commission, (in 1962), I read to a blind psychiatric social worker. I read her intake work. That was fascinating. I then got involved in home and school and became chair of the Forest Hill Home and School Association. Forest Hill was an incorporated municipality at that point. I was chair when we were incorporated into Toronto and the education system changed and so on... We had our own police department and fire department. The municipal offices were on Eglinton.” After that, Sybil became involved in a stitching organization and became president of the Pomegranate Guild of Judaic Stitchery.

Jack prompted her to talk about her work with the Red Cross.

Sybil said, “When I was at Home and School, one of the things we did was blood clinics. And I promised the girls that as soon as I finished [my term at Home and School] I would do it, and I did.” In the late ‘70s, she volunteered at blood clinics and in time became president of the Ontario Division of Canadian Red Cross Society in 1981, and on the national board. “I was on the national blood transfusion advisory committee in Ottawa – I was the only lay person on that – in ’82 during the AIDS trauma. And then what else did I do? I graduated from all of that, retired, and became president of the Later Life Learning at the University of Toronto, and on the board of the senior alumni [for which I received the Arbor Award] and so on. And now I am retired! Totally retired as of today.”

In the 1970s, Jack became a pathbreaker of a different kind when he became the first Jewish member of the National Club in Toronto. Sybil explained that earlier, he had been invited to join the Granite Club, another exclusive social club in the city.

“This was when they were going to open the doors [to Jewish members]...The Granite Club had earlier approached him and said, “We would like to have you as our member.” He said, “If I am the first Jew, yes,” and they said, “No, we want you.” The implication was that Jack would be the only one. So he refused the invitation.

“The history of Campbell Godfrey was with the National Club. Arnoldi was a founder of the firm and his portrait is up in the National Club and he [held office]. (It was Arnoldi, Parry and Campbell, which became Campbell, Godfrey and Lewtas, which became Campbell, Godfrey, Lewtas, Powell, Godfrey and whatever, which is now

Fasken Martineau Dumoulin) So that was the club with which the firm was associated. Although the senators Godfrey and Campbell were associated with the Toronto Club, the others were at the National Club.

C. Minto Pyle was at the National Club and that was Jack's great hero as a lawyer. Pyle proposed him for membership on June 25, 1971. And they said, 'Yes.' And that was it. He's had an interesting history there – as a member, never on the executive, but a member of the Wine Committee. He resigned post-stroke from the wine committee there, because his taste buds had changed..but they appointed him as an honorary member and include him.”

In those years, there was also a legal organization for Jewish lawyers with Canadian branches in Montreal and Toronto, called the Reading Law Club.⁶ It operated in Toronto from 1947 until the mid-60s, during a period in which Jews were barred, formally until about 1952, from membership in the most prestigious lawyers' association, the Lawyers Club. Sybil explained that because the Lawyers' Club was an exclusionary group, the other members of Campbell Godfrey did not join, and consequently Jack did not join the Reading Law Club. The Reading Law Club was not officially exclusionary but its members were almost 100% Jewish.

However, Sybil joined the Lady Reading Club, for wives of Jewish lawyers. “I got a call – we were still living in Don Mills – I'll never forget it, from Helen Aarons, the mother of Bob Aarons, a Jewish lawyer.

⁶ See Sophia Sperdakos, “‘A Forum for Discussion’ and a Place of Respite: Jewish Lawyers and Toronto's Reading Law Club,” forthcoming.

“She said to me, ‘You will join.’ She said, ‘It will be good for your husband’s career.’ So I said, ‘OK.’ He came home and I said, ‘I’ve joined the Lady Reading Club.’ ‘Why did you do that! Jack said. Anyway, I was committed to Helen and Helen wouldn’t let go of me. So yes, I joined. This was in the late ‘50s. I became programme chairman, and this is how:”

“I went to two or three meetings. I realized that the meetings would not help his career, because though there was a speaker at most of them, and the main conversation was, ‘Shall we have chopped egg and tuna for the next meeting, or tuna and chopped egg?’ So I wrote a letter resigning, stating why I was resigning – it didn’t meet my criterion. It was the last time I ever did that! They made me programme chairman!” Sybil turned to the pages of the scrapbook that showed programme she had arranged.

Reflecting on the Lady Reading Club, Sybil said, “It served another purpose which...I wasn’t aware of. I really wasn’t sensitive to this other purpose. The one thing I have said publicly...was the inclusiveness of the group. Here were all these wives of [established] lawyers.” She explained why it was called the Lady Reading Club. “Well, you know, it is wives of Jewish lawyers, not Jewish wives of lawyers, because not all the wives were Jewish. And Lady Reading was not Jewish.”

“But it was a very inclusive group. They were wonderful to me. He was just starting, [and the husbands of the other wives were mostly well established]. But I didn’t make my friends there...I sound snobbish when I say this.” She thinks that partly, there was a generational divide, she being younger than most members, but also because the

Gellers had a strong network of friends and involvement with the firm. Most of the lawyer-husbands of women in the Lady Reading Club were in small or sole practice, and in all-Jewish firms..."Yet lots and lots of our friends were in the Reading Law Club. Don Carr and Wolfe Goodman of Goodman and Carr were very close friends, and my cousin Sidney Gangbar. But it didn't meet our needs."

When I asked him, Jack said he felt as if he were making history, as a Jew, when he became partner at Campbell Godfrey, and also as the first Jewish member of the National Club. But Sybil said that at the time, she did not think he was blazing a trail.

She said, "We thought it was perfectly natural. I really did. We thought this is the way it should be...We can't emphasize enough how extraordinary this firm was. There was never a smidgeon of anything, that we would feel 'other'. We were invited to their homes. We were included, and that was such a wonderful feeling. But it felt right – because of the way they were... the way they treated us, they didn't make us feel as if though we were [different]. And they knew that we were Jewish. They knew that we were practising Jews. They came to our homes for Friday night dinner. In fact, Claude Thompson, a partner, died last week, and we attended his funeral. One of the other partners' ex-wives came up to us in the church and said, "Do you remember Friday night dinners? You included me." But it was this way: they came to our children's bar mitzvahs, we went to their children's christenings, communions, weddings – everything...It was wonderful because it truly was "the family." Wasn't it?"

Jack agreed.

Sybil continued, “He still has lunch with two of his partners, Jim Bradshaw and Roger Doe, every six or eight weeks since 1992, when he retired. Everyone in the firm cared for each other. For instance, his secretaries were wonderful. When one would retire they’d pass him on to someone else, you know.” She laughed.

Jack pointed to one photograph, “This one in particular, wonderful.”

Sybil identified her as Trudi Quinn. “When he was on the Commission, and the children were at camp, she used to write to our children [on his behalf and enclose the comics which she had clipped.] That was the atmosphere in this firm. They worked together, they played hard together, they drank together... that’s the way it was.” That pleasant set of working and social relationships continued until the firm amalgamated with Fasken Martineau.

Sybil said, “When you got so big, then it was gone...He did not like the atmosphere, although he was involved in the amalgamation and he thought it would be a good fit. I don’t know whether it was size or whether it was attitude... I don’t know. But he was no longer as happy going to work.”

In 1992, at age 62, Jack left the firm and retired from practice to take a position with the Ontario Securities Commission. Sybil explained, “The way informed me, and I’ll never forgive him for this, he came home one day and he said to me as he was walking up the stairs to change, he leaned over the railing, and said, ‘Oh, by the way dear, I’ve left the firm.’”

We had been together at that point [for forty years and more], and he had not made a major decision without discussing it with me. He made up his mind and... HE LEFT THE FIRM!"

She laughed and repeated to Jack, "I'll never forgive you. Anyway, what happened was Ed Waitzer had been approached by [Ontario Premier] Bob Rae to head the [Ontario Securities] Commission and Ed Waitzer's parents were friends of ours. Ed was the same age as our older son...The story I got was that Ed phoned him and said, "Jack, if you'll come with me as Vice Chair, I'll go." So, that's what they did. And they had this wonderful relationship, wonderful, wonderful working relationship."⁷

Jack confirmed that he loved working with Ed especially, and others whom he greatly respected at the Ontario Securities Commission. "Whatever we did, it worked out very well. No money..."

"No," Sybil agreed. "The first year our income tax—because it was paid on the year before's salary—was more than he earned at the Commission." Sybil laughed again. "You know, Jack said, 'I've had a lot from my life. It's been good to me, it's time to give back.' I'll never forget that. He said, 'It's time to give back.'"

⁷ "An Interview with John Arthur Geller," *Not the OSC Bulletin*, Nov. 19, 1993, 1-2. J. A. Bradshaw, "John Arthur Geller – A Sage Solicitor Goes to the Ontario Securities Commission," *Fasken Campbell Godfrey Securities & Public Transactions Bulletin Extra*, Release 93-11 (October 1993); see also, Connie Sugiyama, interviewer, "Linkages: Jack Geller – At the Helm," *Fasken Link: the Alumni Newsletter of Fasken Campbell Godfrey*, 2 (May 1999), 1-3.



Five years later, Ed Waizer's term was up. Premier Ernie Eves told Jack, "I'm not going to change for now," so Jack became Acting Chair until 2001. Under Jack's leadership, the Ontario Securities Commission became a self-funded Crown corporation and increased its regulatory activities of the mutual fund industry.

Because the children were grown, Sybil was able to travel with Jack to national and international meetings that Jack attended. "I was able to see Jack in action, which I had never seen. He was able—and you'll see this through his community work—he was able to bring together dissenting groups, form a consensus and move on. And I saw him do this time after time. Subsequently I thought, he actually had a virtual Canadian commission working. They respected each other, they knew [each other] and it worked. He loved that."

Sybil added, "I think Jack was disappointed not being [named Commissioner of the Ontario Securities Commission, in 2001...He denied it to me, but I'm sure... I knew he was too old, he wouldn't get it." Jack retired in November 2001, and had his stroke in March, 2002.⁸

During his Ontario Securities Commission years, he was still doing community work. Jack's early community involvements were with Holy Blossom Temple, the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services, and the Canadian Jewish Congress. Sybil said, "I think at one time he was on fourteen boards." He became the regional president and the youngest person to be elected national president of Jewish Immigrant Aid Services.

⁸ See Theresa Tedesco, "OSC Picks Lawyer as Vice-Chairman," *Financial Post*, n.p., n.d., [2003?]

Jack said, “That was fun. That was fun. I was young. Just a kid.”

Sybil agreed. “He really enjoyed it. These were good times. There was good immigration help. Wonderful people.”

As for his work at Holy Blossom Temple, “He held many, many positions, and was made honorary president of Holy Blossom, only the sixth in its 175th year history.”

Jack was involved in the reform movement of Judaism. “He was on the board of the International (American and Canadian) Union of Reform Judaism. One of the positions he’s most proud of was as the Chair of the Joint Commission on Synagogue Music, which brought together lay people, rabbis and cantors. And if you can think of three more disparate groups with their own agendas... For his work with them, they made him an honorary cantor. With the proviso he never sing in public!”

Jack said, “They were right!” Sybil and Jack both laughed.

Jack’s love of music and culture did not extend to the ballet, at least in his early years. Sybil said, “Of all the things we did and all the subscriptions we had, Jack would not go to the ballet. I could not bring him. After he had the stroke, I said, ‘Jack, it’s the best medium for you because there’s no talk. You don’t have to concentrate.’ (We can’t do theatre now, because it’s too fast. Only Shakespeare. We do a lot of Shakespeare because he knows all the plays verbatim, so we can do that. But we can’t do theatre.) So I said, ‘Ballet is perfect.’ But, ‘No, no, no,’ Jack said.

“One day, about four years ago, friends said, ‘We have extra tickets, will you come with us?’ After the performance, Jack said to me, ‘Get a subscription.’ I think it

was because when he was young...the house just revolved around Ruth's ballet dancing, her costumes, and her practices, and her training, and her performing...I think that's why. But when we go to the ballet now, I watch him as much as I watch the stage because he knows more than I do about what's going on...He understands it at a level I don't."

After his stroke, Jack and Sybil continued to work as a team, this time to help the Aphasia Institute and the Toronto Rehab Institute.

Sybil said, "Two years ago, we received the Ambassador Award from the Aphasia Institute...We have two awards I'm proud of. This and the one from the cantors." Jack has been a poster boy, as his larger-than-life-size image was mounted on the exterior of the Toronto Rehab Hospital building on University Avenue.

Sybil said that before 2002, "I couldn't even spell aphasia, let alone know what it was. Now, we realize how common it is. It's not unusual for people with strokes, certainly left-side strokes, to have aphasia. It's devastating to everyone involved, everyone!...You have to have hope. And the small [improvements are so exciting] – I remember all these bits, when he was coming through, were such great events. And I thought that other people were going through this and we have to help. So that's what we try to do now, to help others understand and not give up."

Sybil talked about the difficult years they have endured since Jack's stroke and the assistance they are so grateful to have received. "When Jack had the stroke and was diagnosed with aphasia, and because of the tremendous support from two organizations, the Aphasia Institute and Toronto Rehab, he decided he would go public

with the fact that he has this severe aphasia with a vocabulary of two to three hundred words, and could not read for five years. And they helped so. This book [indicating one album] is very important in our lives because of this and because of how brave he's been, with this."

Jack can now read. He said, "As you can see it's become more difficult but possible."

Pointing to the scrapbook on his activities in programmes at the Aphasia Institute and the Toronto Rehab Hospital, he said, "I've loved the people here, it's been great, just great for that."

Their lives have changed drastically since the stroke. Last year, they sold their cottage in Bracebridge, which they miss "horribly."

However, Jack himself has made much progress since 2002. He is a proud member of the Toastmasters' Gavel Club at the Aphasia Institute; it is the only branch of Toastmasters International for aphasiacs. Jack said that everyone is brave and "everybody helps" each other.

Sybil displayed the Toastmasters' awards Jack has won, and showed me newspaper clippings of the club, articles on the Aphasia Institute, and photographs of events and people, including Barbara Steinmast, with whom Jack had worked professionally.

Sybil described their meetings. "Twenty-five to thirty of them sit around the table and they go through a programme. You'll see, I have the agenda. Jack has chaired

those meetings... Every week, three awards are given out at each meeting. The categories are Table Topics, Smile Award, and Spark Plug.”

She said, “I rarely go into a meeting, Allison. It is too difficult for me. But occasionally they ask me to come (I know them so well now). They will say, ‘I am going to do a speech. Please come in and listen.’ So I will go in but I find it very hard. They are so brave, they are so great, they are so encouraging of each other. They have such a good time. They laugh and they joke, and they criticize each other! When they do a speech, the speech is critiqued. These people who can’t say words...they critique each other. One might say, ‘You didn’t make eye contact.’”

Jack nodded and pretended to be a member congratulating another who spoke: “You did it!”

Our session was ending. Sybil said, “I hope some of this is helpful to the history....I don’t know whether it was unique. I suspect it was; Jack’s firm, Campbell Godfrey, was unique.”

When I asked whether it might be that she and Jack had brought unusual qualities to their lives and careers, Sybil said, “Well, I think we responded to the environment.” She turned to Jack and asked, “We suited, right? We responded well to the environment. We were cocky, you know? When we were married, he was 21 and I was 20, and I knew everything, and he knew more! And here I am, eighty, and I know nothing!”

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